In search of Common Ground: Political Ecology and Conservation in the Development Age

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Abstract

In this essay, we respond to Menon and Karthik's recent comments on our earlier critical review, which appeared in this journal. We clarify some of our original arguments and also draw out practical implications of the conceptual interventions made earlier. Specifically, we draw attention to the common ground shared by political ecology and the social formation of conservation by pointing to *why* conservation becomes necessary in the first place. We thus urge for a refocusing of political ecological attention from limited and limiting critiques of conservation to the root cause of socio-ecological marginalization in today's world: the pursuit of development at multiple scales.

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Main Paper

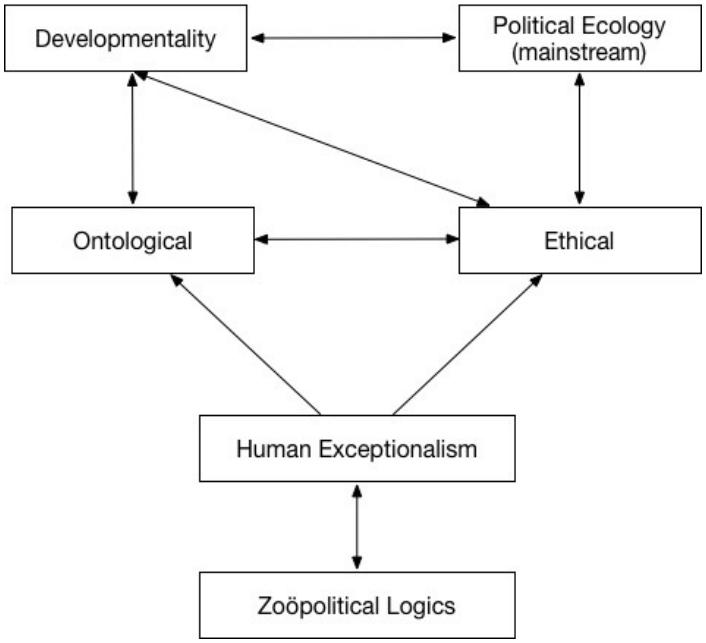
In this short essay, we wish to respond to Menon and Karthik's (2017) helpful engagement with our article (Srinivasan and Kasturirangan 2016) in this journal and by so doing, clarify some of the arguments made there. The core contention of our earlier intervention is that political ecology's anthropocentrism limits its critique of both the social and more-than-human impacts of the development project. This is because anthropocentrism is predicated on zoöpolitical logics of inferiority and superiority (ontological or ethical, and between human *and* human or human *and* nonhuman), which are foundational to the pursuit of development in the contemporary world. Thus, a common foundation, anthropocentrism and its constitutive zoöpolitical logics, underpins both developmentality and mainstream political ecology (Srinivasan and Kasturirangan 2016).

We agree with Menon and Karthik (2017) that political ecology's anthropocentrism is a normative choice. However, our point is that this choice to be anthropocentric has two outcomes: a) it undermines the reach and force of political ecology's analysis of development in and of itself, and of conservation as "part of developmental logics" (Menon and Karthik 2017, 91); and b) it distracts attention from the root cause of social and ecological troubles, i.e., developmentality, by redirecting the political ecological gaze to the social formation of conservation. Conservation, and nonhuman life more generally, thus become scapegoats in conflicts between different human groups.

This is not to say that political ecology must always necessarily place nonhuman life "at the centre" of analysis or normative concern (Menon and Karthik 2017, 92) or even be symmetrical in its attention to human and nonhuman life - although there is some political ecological scholarship that already does this (Srinivasan 2014; Collard 2012). This would be as problematic as saying that scholarship that focuses on vulnerable women should instead or additionally focus on vulnerable men. Rather, our intention is to point out that political ecology's anthropocentrism might have long-term negative consequences for the very focus of its normative attention: vulnerable people. We did this in our earlier intervention by beginning to unpack "the armature upon which" both political ecology's anthropocentrism and development's social and ecological excesses are founded (Menon and Karthik 2017, 91).

Here, we mean 'development' and not just 'developmentality', which is a dominant manifestation of development more broadly conceived. Development has for long rested on a vision of human wellbeing as something that is achieved through insulation and separation from the risks and vulnerabilities associated with being a part of 'nature' (Srinivasan and Kasturirangan 2016). Development, which is not the same as individual efforts to protect oneself and one's loved ones, or even individual acts of altruism, involves institutional and societal arrangements to shore up human wellbeing through the use of nonhuman nature as first and foremost a resource. Development is thus premised on anthropocentrism, which is the ethical arm of human exceptionalism, and which in turn rests on zoöpolitical logics of inferiority and superiority. It is the same anthropocentrism that continues to strongly

influence political ecology and undermines the coherence and strength of its analyses. We attempt to diagrammatically trace these relationships below.



Menon and Karthik (2017, 92) suggest that political ecological scholarship, in challenging "the very nature of these binary oppositions – human and nonhuman", addresses the problems associated with anthropocentrism. However, anthropocentrism and its troubling consequences cannot be addressed by ontological and epistemological non-dualism alone. As Becky Mansfield points out in a discussion on the trope of social natures, geographical scholarship assumes "all will be good" if the nature-society dualism is rejected, and if all are convinced "that nature and society are not real in some immanent sense" (Mansfield and Doyle 2017, 23–24). To Mansfield, this "underlying commitment to nondualism…is not justified" in a world where non-dualist thought and practice, such as designer ecosystems, often aggravate rather than address "power relations that have till now been underpinned by dualism" (Mansfield and Doyle 2017, 23–25).

This applies to political ecological scholarship as well: questions of power, justice, and ethics in the context of human-nonhuman (life) relations cannot be addressed just by acknowledging nonhuman agency or by theorizing life in nondualist terms such as more-than-human assemblages (Srinivasan 2016). While political Ecology might be well-versed in onto-epistemological non-dualism, it continues to remain ethically and politically dualist and exceptionalist (there are exceptions, for e.g., Collard, Dempsey, and Sundberg 2015).

More immediately, our key concern is this: political ecology's anthropocentrism has meant that it has tended to concentrate attention on the social impacts of initiatives to protect nonhuman nature in a planet where spaces for both vulnerable human and nonhuman life are rapidly disappearing. As we wrote earlier, political ecology has "devoted far more

attention to critiquing efforts to protect nonhuman life from the harms caused by developmentality than to developmentality itself" (Srinivasan and Kasturirangan 2016, 125–26). In doing this, i.e., in focusing on conservation-induced displacement, political ecology tends to overlook the pernicious root causes of socio-ecological marginalization: the pursuit of development at multiple scales (Escobar 2015; Kallis and March 2015). It is the pursuit of *development* that makes conservation *necessary in the first place* – but this is often forgotten in social science analyses of conservation.

Our purpose in writing these critical reviews is not to fault political ecology and conservation social science for being "blind to … ecology" (Menon and Karthik 2017, 90). After all, political ecology, like all other knowledge formations, is co-constitutive with the broader socio-political context it is embedded in (Foucault 1984). Rather, it is to locate and highlight the common ground between political ecology and the social formation of conservation (and other spaces of more-than-human social change, such as animal protection). In a recent opinion piece, political ecologists Buscher and Fletcher have made precisely this point by asking conservationists to take up a radical politics that "challenges the integrated social and environmental consequences of capitalist production and the human alienation from nonhuman processes that this same production promotes" (2017, para. 15).

Our point is similar, only directed at political ecology itself: perhaps the best way of addressing the social impacts of conservation – and developmentality - is to work towards a world where conservation is no longer necessary. Perhaps the time has come to see conservation and other more-than-humanisms as allies in the material, conceptual, political, and ethical struggle against developmentality.

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